



Chris Danou's Capitol Report

Wisconsin Continues to Lag Behind in Job Growth

When Scott Walker first ran for Governor in 2010, our state and nation were dealing with the harsh reality of the Great Recession. People were losing their jobs and retirement funds, and college graduates were entering a job market that wasn't ready for them.

During that time, most politicians and candidates running for office were talking about the economy and creating jobs. Sensing the direction of the political trade winds, Scott Walker pledged to the people of Wisconsin that there would be 250,000 new jobs created during his four-year term as Governor. I give him credit for aiming high, but Wisconsin has fallen far short of that goal under his leadership.

Last week, more information was released showing greater proof that Wisconsin is lagging far behind in job growth. According to the Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages, the "gold standard" for measuring job growth and economic expansion, Wisconsin ranked 37th for job growth from 2011-2015. To be fair, Wisconsin wasn't typically known to be a national leader in job growth, but we could always count on being close to the middle or around the national average. Unfortunately, these rankings and specific numbers show we are not only behind our Midwestern neighbors, but we are also below the national average.

The last five years have been very sluggish under the vision, direction and economic policies of Gov. Walker and legislative Republicans. Cumulatively, Wisconsin added 161,823 jobs over the past five years, which is far short of the 250,000 jobs that Gov. Walker promised to help the state add during his first four years in office. Last year, the state created 36,601 jobs last year, which ranked us 8th out of 10 Midwestern states for private sector job growth. No matter one's political affiliation or philosophy, I think we can all agree that we don't want to be sluggish or below the national average in this area.

While there are many layers and variables to this issue, it is clear one party control and political divisiveness is hurting the Wisconsin economy. Leadership comes from the top, and it puts Wisconsin at a serious disadvantage when our top political leader is more focused on appeasing the far right Republican base than doing what's in the best interest of the state.

A perfect example of this mindset is the Governor's unwillingness to increase the gas tax or vehicle registration fees to help pay for our roads. Even though the Wisconsin Department of Transportation, stakeholders, elected leaders at the county, state and local levels have called for such measures, Gov. Walker refuses to act responsibly today so he can pursue political ambitions tomorrow. We need to think about our roads for the next generation instead of having nice-sounding talking points touting "no new taxes" or "no increases in fees" for the next election.

What's truly surprising is that the Governor seems to be somewhat on an island when it comes to this topic. High-ranking members from within his own party, including the Speaker of the Assembly and Majority Leader have publicly acknowledged we need to address transportation funding and find more ways to pay for our roads. However, the Governor refuses to budge from his way own way of thinking and political ideology to do what is needed.

Not only is a change in thinking needed, it also makes better financial sense for taxpayers in the long run. Instead of finding new ways to bring in additional or new revenue to fund our roads, Gov. Walker prefers to borrow to pay for our roads. By putting this important and expensive item on the credit card, it will cost taxpayers more money in the long run and puts this serious problem on the back burner.

Clearly there is room for improvement when it comes to crafting policy that actually creates jobs and helps our economy grow. There is also a need for a policy change that appropriately and responsibly funds our roads and transportation needs. However, the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior, and based on the past behavior by our Governor and legislative Republicans, it's perhaps fair to say that the likelihood of seeing a change in economic and transportation policy is very slim.

It's obvious that the results under the Governor and the Republican majority aren't anything to be proud of when comparing our situation to our Midwestern neighbors or the national average. The current direction isn't working and we need to change our course because we can't afford falling further behind in job growth or irresponsibly borrowing to pay for our roads because of short-sighted vision from the current administration.

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